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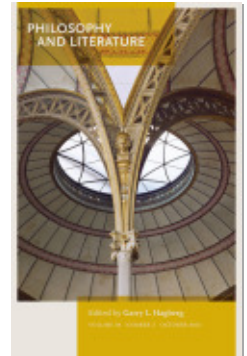
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RICHARD ELDRIDGE

WORDSWORTH AND “A NEW CONDITION OF PHILOSOPHY”

IT WILL SEEM ODD to both philosophers and literary critics to claim a central relation—both for the practice of philosophy and for understanding Wordsworth—between Wordsworth and philosophy. It will seem odd to philosophers on the one hand because it is trivial, in that holding *some* very general assumptions about humanity is inevitable for anyone, so why not for Wordsworth, and, on the other hand, because Wordsworth is so obviously *literary*: his having held such assumptions is obviously not what matters about him; he tells stories and purveys images, philosophers may note, rather than producing reasoned arguments for his claims. It will seem odd to many or most literary critics nowadays because, in the wakes of existentialism, New Criticism with its attentions to paradoxes of expression, poststructuralism, and New Historicism, it appears that there is no such thing as the practice of philosophy into which anyone could enter: there's only willful self-assertion, or ideology, or pervasive irony, or paradox, or thought undoing itself, or shifts in cultural *épistèmes*; reason is impotent either to validate or to condemn deep views about human nature, justice, or the good, views which instead come to individuals only as a result of their contingent individual psychologies or cultural circumstances. But a central relation between Wordsworth and philosophy is nonetheless what I wish to claim.

This claim is not a matter simply of tracing influences from philosophy in Wordsworth's writing as such. There are many ways to be influenced by canonical philosophical writings that are not themselves distinctively philosophical, such as borrowing images and general conceptions of human life (as in Yeats's references to Plato). Such

borrowings do not constitute entering into the enterprise of philosophy, do not embody the dialectical movement of thought in conversation with its traditions, seeking deep necessities of reason. Wordsworth's writings, however, do importantly embody this dialectical movement, I claim, in ways that transfigure and deepen our sense of the possibilities of practice of both philosophy and poetry. Surveying his achievement is hence something more than a chapter in the history of literary ideas. It makes available to us awareness of forces, modes of expression, and results that already implicitly figure in and are expressed by all writing about human value. It shows us what our reflective engagements with questions of human value have been implicitly and can be self-consciously. In doing this, Wordsworth's writing transfigures our understanding of reason and its relations to images, plots, and sociohistorical circumstances.

Wordsworth did *not* centrally or typically produce philosophical *theories*. He is not read by philosophers as a philosopher, as one whose abstract, systematic views of human life or nature or God matter apart from their contexts of production. He writes centrally about his own life, about his reactions to certain scenes and incidents, and about the reactions and experiences of imagined particular others. When he tries to be explicitly theoretical and systematic, he is often at his didactic and obscurantist worst.¹ The provisional views about human life at which he arrives cannot be understood or assessed without attending to his particular experiences and his actions. The subject and the object of his reflections—humanity and its triumphs and reversals as they have appeared in him—are identical. In all these senses, Wordsworth is, in his central preoccupations, what we would be inclined to call literary. It follows that the claim that there is a central relation between Wordsworth and philosophy implies and argues for the further claims that there is a central interrelation between philosophy and literature, at least when certain values in human life are in question, and that philosophy, when these values are in question, cannot profitably bypass the consideration of culture and cultural figures in order to achieve its results more directly.

So how does Wordsworth, in his literariness, do this thing, enter innovatively into the practice of philosophy? What might following out Wordsworth's practice tell us about the possibilities and prospects of philosophy and literature in a postfoundationalist, postsystematic age? What might it teach us about Wordsworth's own peculiar ambitions, egotism, and spiritual formation? What might it teach us about the

simultaneous inevitability and impossibility of philosophy itself as a condition of human life? What is it to take seriously both the demands of reason and the pervasiveness of contingency?

I

Philosophy has had as its traditional defining ambition the effort to transcend locality and conventionality. It has sought *inter alia* timeless and necessary truths about essences rather than temporally circumscribed and contingent descriptions of local organizations of phenomena, framework principles of all possible experience rather than particular empirical observations, the analytic rather than the synthetic, accounts of how one simply as a person ought to live rather than prescriptions only for Athenians or Americans or Christians or proletarians. Seemingly, only if it is possible to fulfill this ambition will philosophy be able to secure its autonomy either from opinion or from the various empirical sciences and will it further be able to establish the governing conditions for fully human and rationally mandated judgment and self-responsibility.

It is hard not to believe that we have some capacity for transcending local circumstances and conventions. Too many people apparently succeed in putting behind them reasonably such things as the preoccupations of childhood and the mores of their neighborhoods or classes for it to be clear that we *cannot* resist the influences of particular circumstances on us. Within recent postfoundationalist, hermeneutic conceptions of philosophy, however, it seems equally hard to believe that philosophy's traditional defining ambition can be realized. Richard Rorty has urged that it is time to accept the fact "that the notions of criteria and choice . . . are no longer in point when it comes to changes from one language game to another":² there's just social change. Consequently, following Freud, we should "abjure the notion of the 'truly human'" and give up the traditional ambitions of philosophy, for there are in the world only webs of relations, not persons with an essential humanity waiting to be realized.³

What motivates this thought of Rorty's is the now common idea that intuitions are shaped by theoretical and practical backgrounds. What one accepts as relevant data for thinking about essences or principles of possible experience or impersonal necessities seems to us, in looking at the past of philosophy, to depend significantly on tacit conceptual frameworks and practical and spiritual aspirations specific to local

communities. Plato seems to speak for the aspirations of mathematically inclined Greek elites, Descartes for those who are committed to modern science yet retain Augustinian senses of individual inwardness and autonomy, Hume for those who share the managerial ambitions of the modern social sciences to ameliorate social misery, and so on. Even if we were to succeed, moreover, in discovering necessary truths about structures of reality, about procedures for scientific investigation, or about modes of human conduct, we would, as Hegel insistently noted, nonetheless still face the further problem of how to bring these discoveries fruitfully to bear on our present practices. What counts as appropriately harmonizing the elements of one's soul, as judging on the basis of clear and distinct perception, as doing what is natural, in this time and place? Here, too, the particular and local seemingly must influence what we will specifically make of ourselves, even if philosophy is granted certain abstract, intellectual successes. Rorty's casualness about the impotence of reason is thus a plausible response to the difficulties of reason in envisioning and instancing a culture of justice. The persistence of multifarious, even apparently incommensurable, forms of domination, despite, and perhaps because of, reason as we have known it is a pervasive social fact. How, then, can we reasonably persist in our philosophical ambitions? But how, equally, without unnaturally repressing our own reflectiveness and capabilities of partial transcendence, can we give these ambitions up?

Romanticism, it can be argued, is a form of human sensibility, dominant in the early part of the nineteenth century in both England and Germany, and above all in Wordsworth, that takes these questions seriously, that sees a human life as shaped by its ongoing struggle with them. Wordsworthian Romanticism is marked by a continuous awareness of the local and temporal situatedness of human thought, so much so that human thought is typically represented as occasioned by specific places and as including an awareness of its own temporal development. Wordsworth's "metaphysical paeans," as Kenneth R. Johnston has put it, "are motivated from specific social and personal situations."⁴ Yet at the same time it continues in the traditional ambition of philosophy to help us found our lives on deep necessities of our nature, against the stale conventionalities that it confronts: it has its metaphysical paeans. Within this form of human sensibility, philosophical reflectiveness about deep necessities that ought to govern human life is understood as neither impotent in the face of the onrush of specific practices nor as their complete and perfect master. Philosophical reflectiveness be-

comes situated as an expression of particular responsiveness to the general human problem of leading a life authentically, in awareness of deep necessities, rather than only conventionally and mechanically. Romantic philosophical reflectiveness thus resists full closure and generality as it retains its sense of the particular. But at the same time it resists deflation into a narrative of the merely particular as it continues to strive to achieve generality.

Romanticism's particular way of expressing its responsiveness to both its situatedness and its continuing philosophical ambition further involves a kind of studied ambiguity or alternation between literary particularities and philosophical generalities. Passages of highly charged, particularized, and competing landscape description alternate with passages of metaphysics. If such amalgamations are what philosophical thinking and the search for self-understanding naturally and fully come to, in Wordsworth's writing, then our struggles for self-understanding now can be and are fed not so much by reason and its confident assurances and assertions as by the competing but also complicit claims of individual power and communal engagement. Philosophy itself is thus cast as literary, insofar as Romanticism sees no routes to understandings of human mindedness and its possibilities of authenticity apart from narrations of highly contextualized expressions of our mindedness and its influences and attractions. Yet literature itself is cast as philosophical, insofar as Romanticism sees all narrations of particular experience as at the same time expressions of common human mindedness and its possibilities of development.

In all these ways—in its simultaneous awareness of the situatedness and the unavoidability of its general reflections, in its simultaneous sense of the conditions and limits of general theorizing and refusal to scant our capacities for transcendence, in its resistance to closure while still seeking generality, and in its ambiguous alternations between traditional philosophical generalizing and traditional literary narration of the particular—Romanticism, standing at the intersection of Enlightenment and Christian self-confidence with historicist and anthropological doubt, thus offers us a “placement of the [situated] human person at the center” of reflectiveness that is a “new condition of philosophy, not metaphysical elaboration.”⁵ It teaches us to ask new ranges of questions about any text of self-understanding: not only, “is its argument sound?” or “are its images compelling?” but also, “how does it express (and repress) the competing claims of individuality and community?” and “how does it stand as present prophecy about the

contextual conciliation of these claims?"⁶ Romanticism both offers us and itself scrutinizes highly temporalized, contextualized, and revisable, yet still general, interpretations of human being in the world and its possibilities of fullest development. It thus offers us, potentially, a way between existentialist and ultimately postmodernist images of our unconstrained freedom and lack of responsibility to merely so-called necessities, on the one hand, and the inflexible closures of perfected theories of value that distinguish the classical philosophical tradition, on the other. To follow out Wordsworthian Romanticism's enactment of this new condition of philosophy will thus be one way to test our own possibilities for philosophy as an ongoing interpretive enterprise in a time of omnipresent historicist and anthropological doubt.

II

Since Geoffrey Hartman's epochal *Wordsworth's Poetry, 1787-1814* in 1964, it has been widely recognized that Wordsworth's poetic achievement is fundamentally structured by the recountings of his alternating experiences, as a traveler halted in a particular spot, of the sublime and the beautiful, by what Hartman calls his moments of apocalypse and akedah.⁷ The 1974 publication of the essay fragment on "The Sublime and the Beautiful" (initially conjectured 1811-12, but more likely "a palimpsest of materials written between 1806 and 1819" and revised between 1820 and 1823)⁸ in the *Prose Works* enables us to review Wordsworth's own account of the characters of these fundamental moments of experience that structure his poetry and inform the understandings of human life that it embodies. In this fragment, Wordsworth compactly summarizes his views about the agencies of education that can lead human beings in particular natural contexts toward understandings and achievements of authentically human life.

Strikingly, Wordsworth throughout the fragment condemns all efforts to achieve an understanding of our best possibilities of human life that require us to step outside human experience so as to see the world as it is, as it were, in itself.

The true province of the philosopher is not to grope about in the external world &, when he has perceived or detected in an object such or such a quality or power, to set himself to the task of persuading the world that such is a sublime or beautiful object, but to look into his own mind & determine the law by which he is affected. . . . To talk of an object as

being sublime or beautiful in itself, without references to some subject by whom that sublimity or beauty is perceived, is absurd. . . .⁹

Wordsworth's account of the importance for human life of these experiences of sublimity and beauty is thus fully internalist or immanentist. Whatever sense we can make of how and why these experiences matter, we must make from within the having of them. "Neither the immediate nor the final cause of [how experiences of sublimity and beauty recur and influence us over time] need here be examined" (p. 349)—perhaps because focusing on immediate causes would derogate our autonomous contributions to these experiences, while focusing on final causes would make any account of their importance too decontextualized to be plausible. We must attempt to understand these experiences and their value by taking them as they specifically come to us.

Despite its marked internalism, however, Wordsworth's account of the sublime and the beautiful includes a sense of the transcendental importance of the experiences of them. No matter what local background, temperament, taste, relations, and so on one might have, the regular experience of both the sublime and the beautiful is, Wordsworth judges, necessary for a fully human life. This is a claim about the capacities of persons as such, a claim about what their nature makes possible and impossible for them. "It is impossible that a mind can be in a healthy state that is not frequently and strongly moved by both beauty and sublimity . . ." (p. 249). That is, it is a necessary truth about persons that they must, if they are to live authentically, experience both sublimity and beauty. This necessary truth further supports a clear normative demand that transcends local interests and situations. Given that persons in general ought to live authentically and humanly, they ought further to open themselves to these experiences. Human mindedness as such ought to be shaped by them. "It is of infinite importance to the noblest feelings of the Mind & to its very highest powers that the forms of Nature should be accurately contemplated, &, if described, in language that shall prove that we understand the several grand constitutional laws under which it has been ordained that *these objects should everlastingly affect the mind* . . ." (p. 350; italics mine).

Beginning, it would seem, by working through his own experiences of the sublime and the beautiful, Wordsworth has here arrived, or claims to have arrived, at an understanding of what is required of human beings as such, if they are to live according to the best

possibilities of their nature. A kind of transcendentalism—a sense of what is required of human-mindedness in general, not only of what it is best for particularly situated persons to do—survives and even grows out of particular experience. This transcendentalism is expressed in a kind of prophetic reminder—not quite an abstract, decontextualized, categorical moral principle, but not quite a hypothetical imperative addressed to wants, either—of the importance for human life of the experiences of beauty and sublimity. Philosophical reflection about the general demands our nature places on itself is here sited as internal to particular human experience.

In order to appreciate Wordsworth's transcendental claims fully and in order to assess their plausibility, it is necessary to elaborate in detail what further human experiences and traits of character, in Wordsworth's view, are enabled or awakened or quickened or developed by the experiences of the sublime and the beautiful. In Wordsworth's judgment, each of these experiences directly bears all at once on political life, human relationships, self-understanding, one's possibilities of writing, and the general life of culture, and it is through the fact of these effects that the sublime and the beautiful display their transcendental importance. Roughly, the personal and political effects, the values, and the typical figures of the sublime and the beautiful can be set out in a table of opposites.¹⁰

Effects, Values, and Figures

Of Sublimity

ecstasy
transcendence
revolutionism
contest
autonomy
timelessness
sounding cataracts
ruggedness
depth
disruption, abandonment
apocalypse
madness
indeterminacy
tolerance
distance
otherness
inspiration, writing as automatism
freedom, the moral law, reason, awe, fear
"[the] sense of repose [that is
necessary for sublimity] is the result
of reason & the moral law" (p. 355)

Of Beauty

limitation
communicability
Burkean conservatism
conciliation
connectedness, culture
locality
pastoral landscape
smoothness
surface
dwelling, domestication
akedah
hollowness, conventionality
order, harmony
attentiveness
nurture
solidarity
composure, craft, discipline
love, engagement, gentleness
". . . the love & gentleness
which accompany
[beauty]" (p. 349)

In his prose writing and his poetry, Wordsworth, as Theresa M. Kelley has noted, "repeatedly describes sublimity and beauty as successive, then competing categories,"¹¹ just as the poetry similarly repeatedly represents scenes of abandonment to the sublime that are then recuperated and made intelligible through a subsequent experience of the beautiful. Thus the sublime is "harnessed . . . to a reiterated aesthetic contest with the beautiful [and] this contest . . . is the scene of Wordsworth's aesthetic instruction."¹² Given, further, the ranges of effects, values, and figures involved in the experiences of the sublime and the beautiful, this continuing contest is equally the scene of Wordsworth's political, moral, perceptual, religious, and writerly instruction—indeed, of his instruction as a philosophical and human intelligence capable of persisting in transcendental claims from within individual experiences.

Crucially, that the sublime and the beautiful, together with their effects, figures, and values, continuously contest or compete with one another within Wordsworth's consciousness and writing is not, in his view, an accidental or contingent feature of them, not simply an arbitrarily willed artistic conception that might be rejected. Beauty and its values and effects are in the first instance necessary for sublimity. Without a certain amount of domestication of the object of experience for the conscious mind, the mind will simply be overwhelmed or terrified and will fail to enter into the elevations of one's autonomy and reason that are central to the experience of sublimity. "If personal fear be strained beyond a certain point, this sensation [of sublimity] is soon destroyed . . ." (p. 354). That is, if the awe and fear that are distinctive of the sublime are too overwhelming, then the experience of "intense unity" (p. 354) that is essential to sublimity will be dissipated. Instead, in all genuinely sublime experience, "awe or personal apprehension" typical of the sublime and "the milder influence of duration" associated with the beautiful "act conjointly" (p. 353). The sublime thus requires an admixture of the beautiful in order to achieve its proper effects. Likewise, the experience of the beautiful requires an admixture of sublimity or a contribution from the mind's own resources, if the experience of beauty is to be anything more than a passively experienced charm of sensation.

Yet despite being necessary for the experience of sublimity, the experience of beauty is at the same time entirely incompatible with it. "The same object may be both sublime & beautiful; or, speaking more accurately, . . . it may have the power of affecting us both with the sense

of beauty & the sense of sublimity; tho' . . . the mind cannot be affected by both these sensations at the same time, for they are not only different from, but opposite to, each other" (p. 349). It would seem then that we can experience neither sublimity nor beauty. Each experience seemingly requires that other to occur simultaneously as a condition of its possibility, yet each experience cancels the other out.

The result is that we cannot fully immerse ourselves in either experience and its values. The admixture of beauty that figures in the experience of sublimity undoes the liberating effects of the sublime, while the admixture of sublimity in beauty undoes the rebinding effects of the beautiful. Each admixture thus undermines and challenges the effects and values of the other. To achieve a balance between the effects of these experiences would be to enter a state of dulled ordinariness, a state that immediately calls for the unbinding effects of sublimity and subsequently for the chastening effects of the beautiful, leading into alternations without end. To have human consciousness at all, in Wordsworth's conception, is to be caught continually between these two poles of experience. Aspects of sublimity and of beauty, in changing relations of relative dominance, figure in each experience we have. We find ourselves continually either swerving between imperfect or always already internally compromised experiences of beauty and sublimity. Thus Wordsworth describes the "savage torpor" of his countrymen, deadened by the requirements of civility and order, as a state that is disrupted for them only by "outrageous stimulation" of the sort that he describes himself as having succumbed to at the Bartholomew Fair.¹³

To the extent then that the claims about the transcendental importance for human life of the experiences of both sublimity and beauty can be sustained, they must be sustained from within these swerves between internally compromised experiences. We can only acknowledge the importance of these distinctive dimensions of human experience through our encounters with what we take to be exemplary, albeit compromised, possibilities of experience, in ourselves and others. We cannot know the pure essences of these experiences apart from their imperfect alternating manifestations. We must interpret for ourselves the significance of these experiences that simultaneously enable and cancel one another, as they occur in both our own lives and the other lives we encounter narratively. While experiences of sublimity and beauty may be had from encounters with other people—for example in the power of virtuoso musical performance or in the charms of amiability—and thus may have a social history, the capacity for these

experiences is nonetheless natural to the person, as they figure dimly in each experience we have. If we are to live fully and humanly, Wordsworth judges, then we must fully receive and enact their simultaneously opposed and complementary instructions.

Do the experiences of sublimity and beauty then have, for everyone, the importance that Wordsworth claims for them? Are their regular occurrences genuinely necessary conditions for a fully human life, for the healthy life of a humanly minded creature? Most importantly, to what extent can a poet's understanding of the importance of these experiences and their values both be achieved through his writing, which opens itself to them, and lend authority to it? These questions, particularly the last, are the questions fundamentally in play in *The Prelude*, as Wordsworth attempts to review his own fostering "alike by beauty and by fear" (I, 302),¹⁴ so as to establish the fitness of his philosophical understanding, hence his further fitness to write the great poem of social instruction that he took to lie before him as his major appointed task. At issue for Wordsworth is whether he will be able to "speak / A lasting inspiration" (XIV, 446–47), to articulate and sustain transcendental claims about human life despite his acceptance of the internality of philosophical reflection to particular situations.

Whether there are any possibilities for achieving and sustaining transcendental claims from within one's own experience—whether there are any possibilities for interpretive philosophy that would claim philosophy's traditional defining ambitions while acknowledging its own particular situatedness—is hence something that we can hope to test by scrutinizing Wordsworth's effort to achieve and sustain the transcendental claims on which he would rest his own authority. How does *The Prelude* end? Is its claim to enact an achievement of transcendental understanding plausible? Do we, from our own experiences, find its transcendental conclusions to stand, to "speak / A lasting inspiration"? How might a lasting inspiration be spoken?

III

Book XIV of the 1850 *Prelude*, entitled "Conclusion," unpublished during Wordsworth's lifetime, and itself the result of continuous reworking of Book XIII, "Conclusion," of the likewise unpublished 1805 *Prelude*, with major revisions carried out in 1806, 1816–19, 1831–32, and 1838–39, is the result of Wordsworth's continuous attempts to achieve for the story of his own formation a moral or ending that would carry general significance. It is in Book XIV that Wordsworth reflects

directly on the significance of the experiences described in the preceding books, in the hope of arriving at sustainable general claims about human life. Book XIV thus represents, particularly in its opening third, where the ascent of Snowdon is narrated and its metaphysical and social importance developed, what Johnston has called "the poem's fullest elaboration of its 'spots of time' representation of mental growth: expectation, followed by surprise, leading to reinterpretation of mental powers, and *here more than anywhere else*, to metaphysical generalization and social application."¹⁵ In recounting the ascent of Snowdon, during which various aspects of beauty and sublimity are experienced alternately and in fusion, and in meditating on its significance, Book XIV thus develops and completes the concluding claim of Book XIII that the poet had, with sublime visionariness, "seemed about this time to gain clear sight / Of a new world" (XIII, 369–70), yet in such a way that this world remained "fit / To be transmitted, and to other eyes / Made visible" (XIII, 370–72), in keeping with the value of communicability associated with the experience of beauty. The account of the ascent of Snowdon that opens Book XIV records experiences of aspects of both sublimity and beauty, until the poet then turns explicitly to both metaphysical and social interpretation of these experiences (together with the prior experiences they in turn recall) as he seeks his conclusion.

Within Book XIV, the crucial passages where the conclusions are tested occur in lines 130–70. These lines follow the opening narration of the ascent, which occupies lines 1–62 and the initial metaphysical interpretation of that ascent's significance, given in lines 63–129, in which we are told that minds that "Acknowledge when thus moved" (XIV, 87) that sublimity and beauty bear their transcendental importance for human life are "truly from the Deity, . . . Powers [who possess] the highest bliss / That flesh can know" (XIV, 113–15).¹⁶ Following these grand passages of the metaphysics of Imagination and of minds as Powers, lines 130–70 then attempt to resituate these claims within the frame of the life of the poet, in order to represent them as recording real and significant possibilities of human life that we may, like the poet, enter into through a course of formation, rather than simply groundless and philosophically jejune metaphysical speculations. Lines 130–70 record Wordsworth's crucial attempt to establish his metaphysical elaborations as livable claims for himself and for us. It is thus in these lines that the possibility of sustaining transcendental claims from within the frame of a particular, situated human life is most fully tested.

What enabled the poet's understanding of the transcendental impor-

tance for human life of sublimity and beauty, together with their associated values? How might the values supported by imperfect experiences of sublimity and beauty be fruitfully combined within a particular human life? Has the poet's life itself really so combined these values? What agencies of formation made this possible, if it is actual? In taking up these questions explicitly in lines 130–70, Wordsworth is, as Johnston aptly observes, attempting "to generalize this power [that is emblemized in the ascent of Snowdon] to others"; we see in this effort at generalization "evidence from a relatively narrow range of morality, used to support extremely large claims: Wordsworth attesting that his own mind's restoration is a philosophic possibility for the general Mind of Man."¹⁷

How compelling are these crucial passages that generalize possibilities of formation? Here is how Wordsworth describes, for the last time, his own particular formation, attempting to bring out its exemplary and generalizable character.

Oh! who is he that hath his whole life long
 Preserved, enlarged, this freedom in himself?
 For this alone is genuine liberty:
 Where is the favoured being who hath held
 That course unchecked, unerring, and untired,
 In one perpetual progress smooth and bright?—
 A humbler destiny have we retraced,
 And told of lapse and hesitating choice,
 And backwards wanderings along thorny ways:
 Yet—compassed round by mountain solitudes,
 Within whose solemn temple I received
 My earliest visitations, careless then
 Of what was given me: and which now I range,
 A meditative, oft a suffering man—
 Do I declare—in accents which, from truth
 Deriving cheerful confidence, shall blend
 Their modulation with these vocal streams—
 That, whatsoever falls my better mind,
 Revolving with the accidents of life,
 May have sustained, that, howso'er misled,
 Never did I, in quest of right and wrong,
 Tamper with conscience from a private aim;
 Nor was in any public hope the dupe
 Of selfish passions; nor did ever yield
 Wilfully to mean cares or low pursuits,

But shrunk with apprehensive jealousy
 From every combination which might aid
 The tendency, too potent in itself,
 Of use and custom to bow down the soul
 Under a growing weight of vulgar sense,
 And substitute a universe of death
 For that which moves with light and life informed,
 Actual, divine, and true. To fear and love,
 To love as prime and chief, for there fear ends,
 Be this ascribed; to early intercourse,
 In presence of sublime or beautiful forms,
 With the adverse principles of pain and joy—
 Evil as one is rashly named by men
 Who know not what they speak. By love subsists
 All lasting grandeur, by pervading love;
 That gone we are as dust.

(XIV, 130–70)

A number of significant features here mark Wordsworth's effort at conclusion, at generalizing, humanizing, and representing as exemplary the course of his own development. There is, first of all, its markedly internalist perspective on how understanding and satisfaction of transcendental demands might be achieved within an ordinary human life, a life that is *not* a "perpetual progress smooth and bright," but rather includes "lapse and hesitating choice, / And backwards wanderings along thorny ways" (XIV, 135, 137–38). The claim is that the progress that has been enacted and recounted is *not* the progress of a categorically superior being, able to understand the shapes and values of human life from without. Significantly, these passages that emphasize the internalist perspective (XIV, 133–46) are 1832 additions, as though Wordsworth throughout his revisions increasingly found it important to qualify and contextualize the grander transcendental claims that already appear in the 1805 text, if those claims were to carry conviction as marking out humanly achievable values.

Second, there are the repeated presences within these lines of alternating, mutually qualifying figures of both sublimity and beauty, of both autonomy and connectedness. "Genuine liberty" (XIV, 132) and its sublimity are represented as lived by a suffering, engaged human figure who retains in his sufferings the likenesses to others that are reinforced by the experience of beauty. The sublime "vocal streams" of the text are to "blend their modulation" with "accents . . . / Deriving

cheerful confidence . . . from truth," in keeping with the values of composure, communication, and surface that are associated with the beautiful (XIV, 144–46). The sublime capacity of the soul to resist "The tendency, too potent in itself, / Of use and custom to bow down the soul / Under a growing weight of vulgar sense" is itself upheld not from within the soul alone, but by "early intercourse" or connectedness with forms in nature (XIV, 157–59, 164).

Most importantly, however, not only are figures of sublimity and beauty incorporated into the text, but the text's overt doctrine further traces the poet's ability to blend the values of the sublime and the beautiful directly to the influence of sublimity and beauty themselves. "To fear and love . . . / Be this"—the poet's human survival and human understanding and satisfaction of transcendental demands—"ascribed; to early intercourse, / In presence of sublime or beautiful forms, / With the adverse principles of pain and joy" (XIV, 162–66). The quickening of the soul and the transcendence of stale custom that stem from the experience of the sublime have themselves, it is claimed, been cured by "love as prime and chief" (XIV, 163), by the harmony among people and nature that the experience of beauty makes manifest. "*This*"—the fact that the poet, a suffering human being, survived and flourished, despite lapses, reversals, and accidents of circumstances and mood—is the result of experiences of "sublime or beautiful forms." And so anyone who fully receives these experiences (which require a cast of mind as well as a stimulus) may likewise survive and flourish, likewise come to understand and satisfy the transcendental demands on human nature that can make themselves fitfully evident through them.

IV

Do we trust and honor this transcendental claim? Can we see our own possibilities in Wordsworth's account of his formation? Or does Wordsworth's account rather enact only fantasized, pleading, and implausible claims to both poetic and moral authority—fantasized because Wordsworth's formation was not or could not have been what he claimed it to be, pleading in its desperate wish to hold its audience by making any transcendental claim no matter how baseless, and implausible because of its fantasized and pleading character? Ever since his continuing efforts to articulate and sustain transcendental claims from within his own experience first became widely evident in "Tintern Abbey," in the *Intimations Ode*, and in the other largest published

poems of his early career, Wordsworth has regularly been charged with implausibility and egotism. This charge seems to apply to *The Prelude* with special force. As Johnston has noted, "Cultural egotism, substituting the individual imagination for vanishing social tradition [as a source of poetic and moral authority], is the central point of *The Prelude*. . . ." ¹⁸

This charge of egotism tends to be supported by the thought that Wordsworth's account of his formation is somehow too inhuman. That formation, many would urge, simply cannot have been the result entirely or predominantly of interchanges between the poet's inmost soul and imagination, on the one hand, and sublime and beautiful scenes in nature, on the other. What about the influence on him of other *people*—parents, siblings, friends, teachers, discussants, readers, and so on? Moreover, what results from the formation that is recounted—apparently a soul in self-possession and self-satisfaction in retirement—seems equally inhuman and deplorable. What about human obligations not only to one's family and to other intimates, but also to the life of society? Can a life and its formation be exemplary if they do not include significant achievements of human care and social justice?

There can perhaps be no conclusive refutation of these charges. There is undeniably a significant individualist and perfectionist strain in Wordsworth's account of his formation, a strain that embraces the thought that it is "the mind of man"—not the life of a social or familial community—that "is itself / Of quality and fabric more divine" (XIV, 450, 455–56). In coming to understand and satisfy the transcendental demands on human nature that he supports, each of us must be, Wordsworth tells us, "Power to thyself; no Helper hast thou here; / Here keepest thou in singleness thy state: / No other can divide with thee this work: / No secondary hand can intervene / To fashion this ability. . . ." (XIV, 210–14).

At the same time, however, these individualist and perfectionist strains are also significantly qualified, and the aspects of these strains that survive qualification themselves may be humanly and politically significant and defensible. Wordsworth continually insists, in both *The Prelude* and other works, that his particular formation, like the formations of persons in general, began not in him alone, but in human and natural relations, in such a way that the first moment of individual being is necessarily irrecoverable and unnameable in being bound up in undecomposable human and natural processes. Wordsworth further

displays persistent anxiety over the reception of his work, as though to acknowledge that his achievement does not stand on its own apart from the life his thoughts and writings may find within a human community, even within the widest community of persons in general that it remained his continual aim to address. *The Prelude* itself includes lavish concluding thanks to Dorothy, to Mary, to Coleridge, and to Wordsworth's benefactor Raisley Calvert (XIV, 232–301) for their parts in his development, and, in being addressed to Coleridge, is itself a vehicle of friendship, including thanks and rejoinders and common remembrances. If all these bits of thanks and senses of the presences of others in the poet's life sometimes strike us as belated or as stemming from anxieties about either the poem's reception or the plausibility of its accounts, they may also sometimes strike us as appropriate and human.

Humanly and politically, Wordsworth's individualism and perfectionism bespeak an opposition to the values and aspirations of both domestic coziness and progressive utilitarianism. A reminder that we are responsible for the continuous care of our own souls, for living up to the values associated with the sublime and the beautiful, opposes our tendencies to domestic relaxation and self-congratulation. Rather than being in comfort, we are to become Powers, thence to achieve fully human relations with others, so that what passes between persons shall reflect their deepest mindedness rather than only certain limited, common, domestic, material lots. Against progressive and reformist utilitarianism, Wordsworth's individualism and perfectionism remind us that political reform must itself be carried out in the name of a vision of the human person and its freedoms and powers. Amelioration of general human misery, no matter how important it is, is on its own perhaps not enough to give point or shape to a human life, and efforts at amelioration logically presuppose a vision of the appropriate possibilities of persons. Hence a perfectionist account of what is possible and fit for persons is logically in order, if it can otherwise sustain itself as humanly plausible. Whether Wordsworth's particular strains of individualism and perfectionism, qualified as they are, are or are not implausible or authoritarian or antidemocratic will be for us to judge, as we arrive, following Wordsworth, at our own accounts of our formations and of what is possible for persons. As with any effort to articulate transcendental demands on human nature from within the frame of an account of a particular individual's formation, we will have to test Wordsworth's vision of our possibilities and necessities against our own, juxtaposing our interpretations, out of our own lives and

experiences, against his. The contestation of variant particular interpretations of personhood and the transcendental demands on it thus appear, in our reception of Wordsworth's interpretation of his own formation, as the general place of philosophical reflection within human life.

Not only, however, do our efforts to test the plausibility of Wordsworth's interpretation of his formation demonstrate the contestable, interpretive character of any account of transcendental demands on human personhood, but Wordsworth's own efforts at concluding his narrative and sustaining his transcendental claims also make manifest what might be called the deep logic of any effort to articulate and sustain transcendental claims from within a particular human position. In the concluding passages of *The Prelude*, narrative particularity not only situates and humanizes, but also continuously *competes with*, transcendental generality. Wordsworth's effort to cast his own formation by experiences of the sublime and the beautiful as a general and valuable possibility for human life is marked by its denial of crucial features of his development that have led him toward his philosophical reflections.

"Never did I," Wordsworth tells us, "in quest of right and wrong, / Tamper with conscience from a private aim; / Nor was in any public hope the dupe / Of selfish passions" (XIV, 150–53)—a claim clearly belied by the earlier, and more plausible, confession that he had initially supported the public hope of the French Revolution out of the selfish hope that he might therein become one of the authoritative "single persons" upon whom "the destiny of Man had still hung" (X, 155–56). "Nor," Wordsworth tells us, did he "ever yield wilfully to mean cares or low pursuits" (XIV, 153–54)—a claim again clearly belied by the earlier confession of how, at Cambridge, he had regularly left the lecture rooms (III, 74–75) to follow his "social . . . heart" that "loved idleness and joy" (III, 212) and "the ordinary works / Of careless youth" (III, 244–45). "Companionships, / Friendships, acquaintances, were welcome all. We sauntered, played, or rioted; we talked / Unprofitable talk at morning hours; / Drifted about along the streets and walks" (III, 249–53). This habit of seeking out entertainments clearly continued, the narrative has already informed us, in London, where Wordsworth likewise succumbed to the "allurement" of low forms of theater and pantomime, spent his time surveying "The spectacles within doors," and wandering through the "din, / Barbarian and infernal," of the Bartholomew Fair (VII, 263, 230, 686–87).

These denials ("Nor did I . . . , Nor was . . . , nor did ever . . .") are

essential to Wordsworth's general transcendental claims. It is as though he must distinguish between his actual, empirical self, moments of whose experience he had earlier narrated, and a deeper, purer, ontological self, which was really influenced all along only by its destiny, enabled by sublimity and beauty, to become a Power. This distinction appears in the moment of conclusion of the writing, as it strives for philosophical generality, *despite* the claim that what has been "retraced" is only "A humbler destiny" of less than perfect progress (XIV, 136). The distinction between a brighter, transcendental self and a darker, empirical one is Wordsworth's typical response to what Johnston has described as his continuing "uncertainty . . . that his 'restorations' were real, actual, true, permanent, substantial—in a word, *philosophically* or *metaphysically* certain."¹⁹

Not only is this distinction typical of Wordsworth's writing, but it is also typical of philosophical writing generally, for it reenacts the traditional philosophical distinction between the bright self of reason and the darker, unrulier, empirically affected self of desire and materiality. In receiving the instructions of sublimity and beauty, these two aspects of human beings are in simultaneous competition and communication. Reason and sublimity here figure as the voice of individuality and departure; materiality and beauty as the voices of community and interrelatedness. Here the effort to secure the generality, the reasonableness, of any transcendental conclusions about our common possibilities and values requires the canceling of the very swerves into particularity that humanize the narrative of development underwriting these conclusions. Philosophical writing remains caught between inflation into implausible claims to pure philosophical understanding and to have traveled an unsullied path toward it, on the one hand, and collapse into insignificant, empirical, narrative particularity, on the other. The general transcendental claims, and the possibility of a smooth progression toward them, must be introduced if the narrative is to overcome particularity so as to attain its significance as a source of moral instruction that will ease and further our own achievements. Yet the particularity of the entire narrative that leads up to these conclusions is the only vehicle for making them humanly plausible. The activity of philosophizing thus occurs continuously caught between collapse into particularity and its narcissism, on the one hand, and inflation into emptiness, on the other. There is here no ready way of "stopping doing philosophy."²⁰ It is perhaps in partial awareness of the continuous threat to internalist transcendentalism that it will either

collapse into insignificant particularities or inflate into inhuman and implausible generalities that Wordsworth wrote that he saw “of absolute accomplishment / Much wanting, so much wanting, in myself” (I, 263–64) and left *The Prelude* unpublished in his lifetime.

And yet if there is not in *The Prelude* any absolute accomplishment, philosophical reflection, arising within the course of a particular human life, somehow still takes place. In arising out of and remaining marked by reflection on the particular, even when it seeks to deny it, the interpretation of human life and its possibilities that we find in *The Prelude* simultaneously opposes smooth and specific teleologies of human life and resists reduction to a merely particular history of mechanical associations and experiences. Assured philosophical generality is continually postponed as we find ourselves “Turned and returned with intricate delay” (IX, 8) by the narrative that would nonetheless attempt to hold itself together as a unified account of coming to understand and to satisfy the transcendental demands of the values associated with sublimity and beauty. What is embodied in this writing is a kind of perfectionist liberalism, as we see enacted an effort to understand and exemplify our best human possibilities that nonetheless, as situated in the particular, cannot be immediately generalized or extended to other situations.²¹ The contending yet mutually enabling experiences and values of sublimity and beauty that Wordsworth, from his own life, represents as fundamental to anyone’s effort to lead a fully human life may plausibly have a transcendental claim on us. They may not. Whether they do will be for each of us to say—“each man’s Mind is to herself / Witness and judge” (XIII, 366–67)—from within our own situations and the general interpretations of human life that they support. Articulating and testing such general interpretations of human life out of particular experience, without end, is the inevitable situation of philosophy, as it takes place in the lives of human persons. Our humanity, Wordsworth’s example suggests, is lived out within these articulations, between the sublimities of partial transcendence into individual vision and the beauties of partial community in shared valuations and engagements.

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1. See Kenneth R. Johnston, *Wordsworth and The Recluse* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984): the problem of *The Recluse* is "rather too much philosophy than too little, giving rise to expectations that it cannot satisfy" (p. 15).
2. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 6.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 118.
4. Johnston, *Wordsworth and The Recluse*, p. 77.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 118.
6. It should not escape notice that these questions ought also to be asked of this text. What conciliations of individuality and community does it hope for? How do its expressions of various human possibilities, failures, and successes enact claims to individuality and community that remain in tension?
7. Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry, 1787-1814* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964, 2d ed. 1971). See esp. pp. ix-xx and 225-42.
8. Theresa M. Kelley, *Wordsworth's Revisionary Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 206.
9. William Wordsworth, "The Sublime and the Beautiful," in *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth, Vol. II*, ed. W. J. B. Owen and J. W. Smyser (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), p. 357. Hereafter all references to this essay fragment will be given in the text by page number, in parentheses.
10. This table has been developed not only out of "The Sublime and the Beautiful," but also out of comparison with the discussion of the sublime and the beautiful in Kant's *Critique of Judgment* and out of the scholarly work of Geoffrey Hartman in *Wordsworth's Poetry*, David B. Pirie in *The Poetry of Grandeur and of Tenderness* (London: Methuen, 1982), and Theresa M. Kelley in *Wordsworth's Revisionary Aesthetics*. Kelley's book is the most detailed survey of the figures and effects of the sublime and the beautiful in Wordsworth's poetry and prose.
11. Kelley, *Wordsworth's Revisionary Aesthetics*, p. 3.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
13. William Wordsworth, "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*," in William Wordsworth, *Selected Poems and Prefaces*, ed. Jack Stillinger (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965), p. 449.
14. All references to *The Prelude* will be to the 1850 version as it appears in William Wordsworth, *The Prelude, 1799, 1805, 1850*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979). They will be given in the text by book number and line number.

15. Johnston, *Wordsworth and The Recluse*, p. 207. Emphasis added.
16. For an analysis of the main claims of these lines of metaphysics, see Richard Eldridge, *On Moral Personhood: Philosophy, Literature, Criticism, and Self-Understanding* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 113–15.
17. Johnston, pp. 209, 210.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 207.
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 109–10.
20. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd ed., trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1958), Section 133, p. 51e.
21. I take the usefulness of *perfectionist liberalism* to describe what is embodied in *The Prelude* from the recent writing of Stanley Cavell on Emerson. See *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988) and *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures after Emerson after Wittgenstein* (Albuquerque: Living Batch Press, 1989). It also invites comparison with certain strains of deconstruction, which may seem continuous with the general Romantic sense of the crossing of any general understanding of our nature by temporality and particularity. As J. Hillis Miller styles it, deconstruction is “neither nihilism nor metaphysics but simply interpretation as such, the untangling of the inherence of metaphysics in nihilism and of nihilism in metaphysics by way of the close reading of texts. This procedure, however, can in no way escape, in its own discourse, from the language of the passages it cites.” “The Critic as Host,” in *Critical Theory Since 1965*, ed. Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1986), p. 458. Derrida makes a similar point in claiming that we “live . . . simultaneously and reconcile . . . in an obscure economy” both Rousseauist transcendentalizing and Nietzschean contextualizing-particularizing interpretations of interpretation (“Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” *Critical Theory Since 1965*, p. 93). For the *political*, as opposed to the domestic, morality of perfectionist liberalism, see Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986).